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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 AMMAN 005109

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SUBJECT: JORDANIAN-PALESTINIANS ON EDGE AS CONFLICT ROILS
ACROSS THE RIVER

Classified By: Ambassador Edward W. Gnehm for reasons 1.5 (b)(d)

SUMMARY

11. (C) The festering Palestinian-Israeli conflict has rekindled sensitivity among some Jordanians of Palestinian origin about their position in Jordanian society, highlighting their strained relationship with the dominant (but minority) East Bank Jordanian community. It also has given rise recently to public discourse over loyalty and Jordanian national identity. Contacts say that discrimination is epitomized by the current iteration of the election law which favors heavily tribal areas, but they also point to the inability of Palestinians to serve in certain high-level government jobs, the military, and intelligence apparatus as proof of institutionalized discrimination. Partly in response, the Prime Minister has initiated unprecedented dialogue with the Palestinian community to address their concerns, but many interlocutors believe that his hands are tied by entrenched East Bank interests (particularly in the security apparatus), making real change impossible without royal intervention. Palestinians' fear of retribution will continue to restrain Palestinian activism, leaving an opening for Islamists to assume the Palestinian mantle in Jordan. Activists worry that the GOJ's inaction on this issue also stymies reform efforts in Jordan. End Summary.

EAST-WEST BANK DIVIDE BUBBLES TO THE SURFACE

12. (C) The stalled peace process and poor humanitarian situation in the West Bank and Gaza have pushed to the surface long-standing but latent sensitivity among many Jordanians of Palestinian origin about their position in society vis-a-vis Jordan's minority but dominant, tribal-based East Bank community. It also has recently generated a top-down debate about "loyalty" and "national identity." At the core is Jordanians' fear that the Israeli security barrier and harsh measures against Palestinians will encourage yet another mass migration (or "transfer") of Palestinians to Jordan, further stressing the country's meager resources and creating instability (by tilting the population balance further toward Palestinians). Many East Bankers openly acknowledge that discrimination against Palestinians exists, but justify it as a necessary evil given the political situation and related security concerns. Prominent East Banker Suleiman Arabiyat asserted recently to PolOffs that the "time is not right" for Jordanian-Palestinians to serve in sensitive government posts, saying that their loyalty will always be in question until a Palestinian state is created and they can decide whether to stay in Jordan or return to Palestine. Many Jordanian-Palestinians, most of whom have always lived under Jordanian rule and enjoy complete Jordanian citizenship, say this attitude is just an excuse for East Bankers intent on preserving their privileged status.

13. (C) Anecdotes highlight the charged nature of the issue. In April, the Interior Minister publicly charged that rioters in Wihdat refugee camp burned a Jordanian flag while protesting Israel's assassination of Sheikh Yassin, a charge many dispute. Contacts confided to PolOff their belief that "entrenched" interests circulated the story to show the "disloyalty" and "ingratitude" of Palestinian refugees, highlighting that no one seems able to prove a flag was actually burned. Separately, Oreib al-Rintawi, a well-known Jordanian-Palestinian journalist and director of al-Quds Center for Political Research, says he was verbally attacked during a lecture in Irbid when he commented that Jordanian civil society would benefit from acknowledging the diversity found in its "collective identity." He told PolOff that the term prompted an East Banker in the audience to accuse him of perpetuating "subversive" and "dangerous" ideas. Since that time he has been dealing with the fallout of the incident, and fears now that he has been "labeled" a troublemaker, even though his only intention was to start much-needed dialogue about issues that are often swept under the rug.

14. (C) The strain has even filtered into seemingly unrelated matters. During a meeting between the Prime Minister and women activists at odds over their perception

that GOJ spokesperson (and womens' activist) Asma Khader was using her government position to their disadvantage, Khader accused the women -- all East Bankers -- of "ganging up" on her because she is Palestinian. The PM dismissed the charge in front of the group and insisted the women work harder to resolve their differences, according to one of the attendees.

ELECTION LAW CENTRAL TO DISCRIMINATION COMPLAINTS

15. (C) Prominent Jordanian-Palestinians say that the GOJ's discrimination against the Palestinian majority manifests in many ways, but most point to the current election law as central. Former royal court adviser Adnan Abu Odeh says the law gives disproportionate representation to the heavily East Bank tribal areas of southern Jordan at the expense of urban areas with heavy Palestinian populations, and says it is the main reason that East Bankers won overwhelmingly in the June 2003 Lower House elections. (Note: Seventeen out of 110 members of parliament elected are of Palestinian origin.) Many contacts of Palestinian descent doubt that the GOJ will give Palestinians representation in Parliament proportional to their percentage of the population, even if it makes good on its promise to revise the law in time for the next parliamentary election in 2007.

16. (C) The dearth of Jordanian-Palestinians in appointed positions also reinforces their sense of exclusion in GOJ decisionmaking. For example, King Abdullah appointed seven Jordanian-Palestinians to his 21-member cabinet. Just seven West Bankers of 55 members sit in the upper house of Parliament, and only a handful of judges and no governors claim Palestinian roots. During a recent meeting with Minister of Information and Communications Technology and Minister of Administrative Development Fawwaz Zu'bi (East Banker), the Ambassador complimented his choice of Hala Lattouf as Secretary General of the Ministry of Administrative Development. Zu'bi replied: "Yes, she's a great choice, but I have to be careful now. She is the third person of Palestinian background that I have appointed! People notice such things."

17. (C) Some interlocutors say the security apparatus is the main enforcer of this discrimination policy, particularly when it comes to excluding Palestinians from key government posts. Many believe that GID chief Sa'ad Khair heavily influences the King's cabinet and upper house appointments. They acknowledge that history contributes to the heavy GID hand (dating back to Black September in 1970 when Palestinian fighters openly battled the GOJ for control of Amman), but add that in some cases, it goes too far. For example, former Sen. Marwan Dudin (Palestinian) alleges that the GID intervenes in the appointment of university officials and even hospital administrators. He said that only orders from the King -- and patience so that changes can take root gradually -- will adequately challenge the status quo.

UNPRECEDENTED GOJ OUTREACH TO PALESTINIANS

18. (C) The friction has not been lost on Prime Minister Faisal al-Fayez, who in recent months has initiated unprecedented dialogue with the Palestinian community about their grievances. While his focus during recent refugee camp visits has affirmed Jordan's commitment to Palestinians' "right to return," a three-hour meeting with Palestinian-affiliated societies in Jordan on May 3 centered on their complaints about discrimination. Director General of the Department of Palestinian Affairs Abdulkarim Abulhaijja, the organizer of the gathering, said he went to great lengths before the meeting to convince people they would not face repercussions for speaking their mind. While Abulhaijja termed the frank discussion "very successful," he added that the Prime Minister's follow-up is key. He told PolOffs that he will "wait and see" whether the PM actually makes good on his promise for further meetings as promised, confiding that he is not confident that al-Fayez, despite his good intentions, is empowered to implement real changes. While he appears receptive to the Palestinians' complaints of discrimination, entrenched interests are "whispering in his other ear" about the dangers of allowing Palestinians greater participation in Jordanian political life, according to Abulhaijja.

19. (C) Palestinians themselves, however, are divided about the issue. Former PM Taher al-Masri (Palestinian) told PolOff he refused to attend the PM's meeting because as a "Jordanian" he resented being singled out for his Palestinian identity (Note: PolOff gathered from his tone that more importantly, he resented being included with a group of society heads, which he deemed "beneath" his stature as a former Prime Minister.) He said such gatherings served to divide, not unite the country, and he said he intended to convey the message to the Prime Minister. Dudin expressed a similar view, adding his criticism of Abu Odeh for attending

the meeting. (Note: Al-Masri is only one of four Jordanian-Palestinians who served as PM in Jordan since 1970. His tenure in 1991 lasted the longest (152 days); Palestinian-origin PMs have served a total of just 251 days in the last 34 years.)

FEAR OF RETRIBUTION LEAVES OPENING TO IAF, STYMIES REFORM

10. (C) Our contacts say that fear of retribution continues to limit dialogue on such sensitive issues and political activism. Rintawi's says his face-off with the irate East Banker is precisely the reason the Palestinian community remains so fractured. Would-be Palestinian activists have shunned the limelight, he says, fearing that raising such sensitive issues in public will earn them the label "disloyal." The fear of retribution hit home recently when a group of Palestinian luminaries sought Embassy intervention with the Jordanian government to pressure the GOJ to reverse a travel policy that could have meant the inadvertent revocation of Jordanian citizenship to thousands of Jordanian-Palestinians. The issue ultimately resolved itself, but at the time, the group pleaded for discretion with PolOff, fearing "severe repercussions" if the GOJ learned they had mentioned their concerns to an Embassy officer. Separately, former MP Mohammad al-Kouz (Palestinian) informed PolOff that shortly before her arrival for a luncheon with Wihdat camp leaders in May, al-Kouz received a call from the Mukhabarat inquiring about the purpose of the gathering and asking for the names of the participants.

11. (C) Rintawi says fear of being targeted has left secular Palestinian activists rudderless, and has enabled the Islamic Action Front to fill the void and emerge as the primary advocate for the Palestinian cause. (Note: Of the 17 MPs of Palestinian origin, eight are IAF members. The one female Palestinian MP is also an IAF member.) He suspects that the GOJ's fear of increasing the Palestinian voice (and by extension that of the IAF) is one reason the government is dragging its feet on reforming the election law. He frets, however, that marginalization of more than half of the population will negatively impact political development and the growth of civil society in Jordan. Former Senator Husni Ayesh (Palestinian) agrees, and says the government risks alienating a significant portion of the community, especially youth, which could have negative security implications down the road if young Palestinians grow up feeling as outcasts with limited opportunities in Jordan. Adviser to the Prime Minister on Human Rights Nancy Bakir (East Banker) notes that the various segments of the Palestinian population have different needs and concerns, but worries that the refugee camps are "boiling." The longer the Palestinian-Israeli crisis festers, the more pronounced the East-West Bank tensions inside Jordan will become, she says.

COMMENT

12. (C) East Bankers tend to dismiss Palestinian complaints about discrimination as "ingratitude" for years of Jordanian support to Palestinian refugees. While Jordan has absorbed more Palestinian refugees than any other Arab country and has provided them the most extensive support (including full citizenship to most) since 1948, their sense of inequity has been magnified by the lack of movement towards a final solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Updating the election law and being included as full partners in the political system are key concerns of Palestinians in Jordan (and also a mantra for reform and civil society activists here), but it will remain a political hot potato in the absence of substantial movement on the peace process.

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